

# **Minister for Disabled People: e-Accessibility Forum Action Plan launch**

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## **Introduction**

Good morning and thank you Jane [Humphries, Chair of the Event on behalf of BIS] for your kind introduction.

It is a great pleasure to see so many people here today at the launch of the new action plan for e-accessibility.

As you have heard from Ed Vaizey, today's event sets out a comprehensive action plan for e-accessibility – marking another welcome step in our bid to ensure that disabled people take full advantage of the developing digital economy.

Of course, the fact that we are here today at all demonstrates that we still have some way to go.

But the good news is that there is a very powerful case for ensuring that disabled people can participate fully online – not just for disabled people themselves, but for society as a whole.

In fact, the arguments in favour are so compelling we really should be pushing at an open door.

On one hand, there are very clear commercial reasons for businesses and other organisations to foster greater digital inclusion.

And on the other, greater e-access presents a whole range of obvious benefits for the vast majority of disabled people in everything from shopping to employment.

## **Commercial imperative**

I'll start with some of the commercial arguments first, because – like it or not – we all recognise that profit can be just as effective in driving change as altruism.

Looking at e-access solely from this perspective, it is clear that many companies simply don't know what they're missing.

To give you a few of the headlines:

- disabled people account for around 18% of the population today – in other words up to 1 in 5 customers of an average business is likely to be disabled
- with an ageing population, this is a market that is also likely to grow – representing almost a quarter of potential customers by 2033 by some estimates [Source: BIS report 'Is business ready for an aging population?']
- and not only is this a growth market, it is also a consumer segment that is currently poorly served in relative terms. According to research by EFD and RADAR, 83% of disabled customers have switched to competitors offering greater accessibility. So companies that get this right will retain more customers – something that more and more firms are recognising makes better business sense than trying to undercut rivals.

In short, by recognising the commercial gains to be made in this market, businesses can:

- expand and diversify their customer base
- increase sales and profits
- and not only that, but keep loyal customers for longer, instead of spending 5 times as much trying to attract new recruits from their rivals.

Some more far-sighted businesses are already seeing the benefits of broadening their customer base to reach more disabled people.

For example:

- one insurance business quoted in a recent Atkins report for the Office for Disability Issues upgraded its website to make it fully accessible to disabled people. That led to a 90% increase in online sales
- companies such as John Lewis are recognising that effective home delivery services offer them access to far greater numbers of both disabled and non-disabled customers
- and in the near future we are going to see more and more savvy retailers wake up to the probable spending power of disabled people. Net household income for households where someone is disabled now totals £196 billion [Source: 'Family Resources Survey'].

With prizes like that on offer, it is no wonder that e-accessibility is building momentum among corporations.

Yet like all the best deals, the benefits don't accrue to just one side.

Which brings to me to my second theme today – the fact that disabled people have just as much to gain from e-accessibility as commercial organisations.

And in many cases, more so.

## **Practical gains**

In terms of employment, we know that digital inclusion is critical for disabled people.

Like the majority of the workforce, being unable to use a computer can present a serious barrier to finding work or accessing services.

That is why this e-Accessibility Action Plan is so important to so many.

We already know there is a strong link between digital exclusion and unemployment.

And we know that disabled people are less likely to be online than non-disabled people, which puts them at a disadvantage.

So by improving access and skills, we should also be able to improve disabled people's access to employment opportunities.

At the same time, improving e-access among disabled people will in turn boost the economic potential of the UK workforce – talent and skills that we badly need to drive the recovery and fuel the growth of UK plc.

At present, there are more than 10 million people in this country with a limiting long term illness or impairment.

So if we can improve the work prospects of even a fraction of that number, we will help drive the recovery in a big way.

## **Conclusion**

Whether you are a silver surfer or a teeny Tweeter, the fact is that digital skills are becoming increasingly important – in society; in work; in education; and in accessing services.

The same is true for everyone – disabled or otherwise – so initiatives like the e-Accessibility Action Plan are crucially important.

We know we have more work to do – especially since the research shows that only 41% of disabled people use the internet compared with 75% of non-disabled people.

But with the skills and dedication of people like you here today, I believe we have all the tools and the talent we need to succeed.

Whether it is a lack of equipment or a lack of insight, I know that we can work together with disabled people to make sure that everyone reaps the full benefits of the internet.

Today marks a good start.

And together, I am sure that we will continue to make further progress toward new milestones in the years ahead.

Thank you

**Ends**